

A Marxist Ecological Vision

— Nicholas Davenport

[The following article is adapted from a presentation at the Solidarity summer school in August 2012. Nicholas Davenport is a member of the newly formed Ecosocialism Working Group of Solidarity. The editors of Against the Current view this contribution as part of an urgently needed discussion.

The questions facing environmental activists, and socialists in particular, range from the sheer scale of the environmental disasters already underway to the problems of beginning a transition from a system organized around massive consumption of fossil fuels, vast megacities and global agribusiness.

In the process of doing so, how will an ecosocialist movement and society address the crisis of global inequality and the need to “develop the productive forces” without pushing the planet and human civilization over the environmental cliff? We look forward to explorations of these questions from a variety of angles and viewpoints. — David Finkel, for the ATC editors]

THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS presents the starkest possible example of both the necessity of and opportunity for revolutionary change. Nothing but a radical transformation of basic social relations can prevent the worst possible outcomes of the crisis. In spite of its overwhelming and frightening magnitude, the ecological crisis presents a moment to revitalize the world revolutionary movement.

However, much of the socialist response to the ecological crisis so far has been inadequate. When we talk about the ecological crisis, socialists often fail to integrate it into our general analysis of the trajectory of bourgeois society and the opportunities for revolution.

Sometimes the crisis is treated as a throwaway conversation-stopper, a factor external to our theory and politics which may make debates about (for instance) the origin of economic crisis

irrelevant in 30 years, but has little bearing on our practice now. At other times socialists do address the crisis, but only as another stick to beat capitalism with — as another illustration of why capitalism presents no solutions — but not integrating an understanding of the ecological crisis and its consequences into our own revolutionary program and vision.

In the absence of a well-articulated revolutionary socialist response to the ecological crisis, all manner of other political responses have emerged, most of which to varying degrees place the responsibility for dealing with the crisis on individuals.

Radically-minded people often state that people in developed countries will need to accept a lower standard of living (no cars, television, meat...) in order to deal with the crisis. Demanding that working-class people change their lifestyles is unlikely to win workers to environmentalism when capitalist austerity is already slashing living standards, and more importantly, is not a sufficient or correct response to the crisis.

Individual or Social Choices?

It is true that the developed nations have unsustainably high levels of energy, water, land and resource consumption. However, the large ecological footprint of developed countries are the result of factors beyond the control of individual workers: among them our government's global military presence, our freeway-based transportation system, and our monocultural system of agriculture.

Rather than focusing on what people consume, we need to struggle for ecologically sound production, which could only be accomplished in a society where the economy is democratically and rationally controlled by the people — one of the central elements of the Marxist revolutionary vision.

However, Marxism is discredited in the eyes of many environmentalists. Many argue that Marxism is fundamentally “productivist” and anti-ecological, pointing to the disastrous ecological record of “socialist” states like the Soviet Union and the neglectful policies of Communist parties around the world.

Even some socialists have asserted that Marxism must drop some old principles in order to deal with the ecological crisis. These debates have touched on many issues, from Marx's

conception of nature to his ideas about work, but this article will focus on perhaps the most prominent issue for debates around production and consumption — the idea of development of the productive forces.

For many Marxists, the idea that the development of society's productive forces is the material basis for social progress is critical to a materialist account of history: capitalism won out over feudalism in Europe because it was more productive, and socialism, in turn, will allow a higher level of development than is possible under capitalism.

Those who adhere to this idea view it as a critical position that distinguishes Marxism from idealism, for it implies that socialism is not just a good idea, but economically necessary. To many others, however, this notion appears overly concerned with expanding production at the expense of ecological and human considerations.

Sarah Grey, in a review of UK Green Party leader Derek Wall's *Babylon and Beyond*, summarizes much of the "common sense" about Marxism among many non-Marxist radicals concerned with the ecological crisis:

"Wall also argues ... that Marx was, and by extension Marxists are, in favor of unfettered capitalist economic growth, writing that 'capitalism in its search for profits is the force that promotes globalization but will mutate into communism' (109) and describing the Marxism promoted by 'many, but not all, Marxists' as promoting 'a productivist politics that celebrates the expansion of the economy' (122). Leaping from Marx's claim that capitalism has developed technology and created the conditions that make a surplus possible, he argues that 'despite the prophecy of many Marxists, the promotion of hyperglobalization seems unlikely to flip society neatly into a socialist order. While there are contradictions inherent in capitalism, it is not a system based on clockwork that will strike twelve and chime in revolution.'" (177).(1)

The idea of development-at-all-costs of the productive forces has certainly given rise to anti-ecological politics, beginning with the degeneration of the Russian Revolution. As the Bolshevik Party bureaucratized, it focused increasingly on controlling and growing the Russian economy at the expense of workers' control and sustainability, culminating, under Stalin, in highly ecologically destructive crash industrialization programs carried out through forcible command.

The Communist parties of the world adopted this conception, leading to catastrophic positions such as siding against indigenous peoples and attempting to ally with local capitalists in colonized nations.

In spite of the anti-ecological legacy of Stalinism, however, revolutionary socialism — including the idea of development of the productive forces — remains essential to developing a winning strategy for ecological transformation of society. But “development of the productive forces” need not be taken to mechanically imply greater material abundance and a heavier ecological footprint.

We can find ways to develop the realization of human potential while shrinking our ecological footprint. Such a focus on human development is the only way to overcome the limitations of the various primitivist, life-stylist and liberal forms of environmentalism that argue that workers in developed countries must accept a lower standard of living — and to forge a movement that can unify ecological concerns with people’s striving for a better life.”

The development of human potential to its fullest extent implies eliminating oppressive toil, and overcoming scarcities of resources truly needed. On the basis of democratic control and a higher level of productivity, a socialist society could make choices about how to supply necessary resources in a sustainable way — exploring viable options for eliminating the scarcity of housing, for example.

Democracy and Sustainability

We can’t plan out beforehand all aspects of how a sustainable society would function, as it would have to be discussed and decided democratically; but in those aspects which we can envision, it becomes clear that the vision of an ecologically sound society coincides with a working-class revolutionary vision.

In an ecologically sustainable society, the economy would be democratically controlled and organized to provide the greatest possible public benefit, which would naturally entail ecological sustainability. Because the economy would be structured to further the development of human potential, technological advances in production would be used to shorten work hours rather than to produce more, leading to more free time to do truly fulfilling activities and allow us greater variety in how we spend our lives.

A sustainable and just society would also eliminate the distinction between productive and reproductive labor by socializing domestic labor (such as childcare, cooking and laundry) through organizing cooperatives. This would be a more efficient way to fulfill people's needs and would further women's liberation, combating the gendered division of labor in society.

In a democratically planned and ecologically rational society, many of the lifestyle changes that individualist environmentalism points to as necessary would occur, but as part of a social process of liberation, not as a forced sacrifice or moralistic principle.

There would be more parks and social gathering spaces that facilitate forms of interaction. Work would be structured in ways that allow people to feel a closer connection with the production of food and resources.

Overall, a socialist society would give us the freedom to live fulfilling lives less centered around consumption, in which we may choose to include some forms of hard work (like vegetable gardening, which is much less labor-efficient than farming but which many people find fulfilling). In these circumstances, the level of individual consumption will naturally decrease, without anyone forcing workers to lower their standard of living.

Certainly there would be changes in what people consume in a sustainable society — an ecologically sound agricultural system would probably supply less meat and less out-of-season produce — but this would occur because of a change in production in context of revolutionary liberation leading to a better life (overall, such an agricultural system would supply healthier, cheaper and better-tasting food), so it would not be experienced as a sacrifice.

All this being said, radicals must face the reality that much of the world does need higher levels of consumption — more stuff. Billions of people in the world need, in order to live fulfilling lives, secure food and water, better transportation and communications infrastructure, and medical services.

Under a democratic, planned program of development, these resources could be produced in different, more efficient and ecologically sound ways, paid for by reparations from imperialist capital for its centuries of exploitation, and in concert with reducing the ecological footprint of the developed countries.

Development of the global South countries is not simply a matter of political principle — it is also an ecological imperative. If people have no secure means of subsistence to live, they will survive as best they can using what means are available to them, which tend to be highly ecologically destructive. For example,

“Hundreds of millions of people still use wood and animal dung for heating, cooking and, lighting. India alone has four hundred million people who live without access to electricity. Poverty is a major part of the reason there is so much deforestation in India, Africa, and parts of Asia. ... Renewable electricity provision for the entire planet — and the eradication of poverty — would have to be part of any move to living sustainably with the earth.”(2)

In order to solve the global ecological crisis, we must undertake an enormous transfer of wealth from capital to the formerly colonized countries, funding development that offers a secure life to the billions of people from whom capitalism has torn the means of subsistence.

Organizing Sustainable Production

The only way to both develop human potential around the world and regenerate a healthy biosphere is through a development of the productive forces of society. A democratically planned and ecologically rational society will be able to overcome the ways in which capitalism is holding us back from producing more efficiently and sustainably.

Although I do not have the space to discuss all the opportunities for more efficient production, I will offer a few examples. In an economy designed to meet human needs, there would be many opportunities to eliminate waste: for example, by eliminating product packaging, by eliminating planned obsolescence so that electronic equipment and machines (e.g. laptops and cell phones) will last longer, by reducing imports and exports and producing locally where most efficient, and by eliminating many industries — advertising, health insurance, financial services, the military — that will be largely useless in a socialist society.

Further, the technological basis of society could be transformed. We could adopt a power system based around solar, wind, geothermal and tidal energy. We could redesign urban areas based around walking, bicycling and public transit. And we could transform our agricultural methods, drawing from organic agriculture and permaculture techniques.

All these transformations in production and social allocation of resources are possible with technologies that exist now, but capitalism's drive for private profit holds us back from implementing them.

Beginning the Struggle

Of course, since an ecologically rational society is incompatible with capitalism, we will have to struggle for it. Every struggle has its particulars, but a few generalizations are possible.

Ecology need not be treated as a separate concern that must be brought into other movements. Because all aspects of society are involved in the relation to nature, all struggles have an ecological dimension; and because a sustainable society and a socialist society are inseparable as the aspiration, conscious or otherwise, of the working class, ecological demands belong in all struggles.

This is illustrated by struggles as diverse as Detroit auto workers demanding retooling of closed plants to manufacture transit vehicles, the anti-austerity struggle in Pittsburgh in defense of public transit, the struggles in Appalachia in defense of working-class communities threatened by coal extraction, and the struggles of indigenous and landless people exploding around the world.

In our involvement in real-world struggle, revolutionaries must maintain a difficult and contradictory balance. We need to join struggles for ecological reforms and yet not slide into suggesting that capitalism with these reforms could avoid ecological catastrophe.

Although this is a complex question that can only be worked out through experience, a revolutionary ecosocialist program — a set of political positions that we put forth in order to present our vision of a better world and to push forward and unite the various political struggles — will help us maintain this balance by linking immediate demands to a revolutionary vision.

Basic elements in an ecosocialist program include such demands as comprehensive public transit and a shorter workweek, but also an end to all U.S. wars, workers' control of production,

cancellation of the Third World debt and reparations to the former colonies for ecologically sound development, indigenous sovereignty, land to the landless, and the expropriation and democratic management of capitalist agriculture. It would also include specifically ecological demands like an industrial conversion away from fossil fuels.

Transitional demands like these have to be part of an explicitly revolutionary program, that envisioning a society which overcomes class exploitation and the oppression of women, people of color, and other oppressed groups and takes strides to re-establish the metabolism between society and nature.

A comprehensive response to the ecological crisis, therefore, not only is consistent with revolutionary Marxism, but demands it. It calls for transcending the legacies of Stalinism and social democracy (which pays lip service to ecological concerns but fails to challenge capitalism) and for rebuilding the world revolutionary tradition.

It would be too easy to slip into catastrophism as the ecological crisis worsens. We must keep in mind, however, that even as things continue to get worse, there will not be one moment where everything is swept away — exploitation and oppression will continue to exist, and we will still have to struggle for the best world we can, even if ecological limits on that world narrow.

We need to integrate an understanding of the new ecological reality with the revolutionary Marxist understanding of the ways human societies (including their relationship to nature) develop and change, and to struggle as best we can on that basis. The task is enormous, but we have the resource of over 150 years of revolutionary experience in the working-class tradition.

Notes

1. Sarah Grey, "Open Source Anti-Capitalism," *Monthly Review*, Vol. 60, Issue 9 (February 2009). Online at <http://monthlyreview.org/2009/02/01/open-source-anti-capitalism>.
2. Chris Williams, *Ecology and Socialism* (Haymarket Books, 2012), 224-25. This concise book offers a complete and practical overview of how a socialist society could transform production in a sustainable way.

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